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**A0924 – June 14, 2009 – Acts 17:30-34 – Jerusalem Meets Athens -
Part 4**

Alright, today we come to the end of Paul's defense at Athens. And by the way, he's not defending himself; he does that later before Festus and Agrippa, but here he's defending the gospel. Before we get into it I want to say a few more things by way of introduction that might help you witness to people. If you put these things together with some of the other things I've mentioned and study these you'll have a fairly decent package on witnessing.

The first thing is 1 Peter 3:15. Some of you say, I'm not Paul, I'm not an apostle and I don't have time to study this and study that and go through all this big long preparation, and after all, and I'm not witnessing to Ph.D's so what's the deal? The deal is 1 Pet 3:15 Because in 1 Peter 3:15 you are told, I am told and all Christians are told to "sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." Now there are two parts to that verse. One part that most people overlook is where it says someone asks you a question. Now why is someone going to ask you a question? Only if they see something different about your life. If you're no different than they are then why would they ask you question? But if you handle trials differently then people notice and ask, hey, why did he handle that situation that way? When I was in that situation I didn't handle it like that. I've never seen that before. And so it prompts a question. That's the first part. Most of the time no one is asking you a question, you're life is your apologetic but when they do ask you a question then comes the second part. Always being ready to make a defense. Now, if someone asks you a question what are you going to tell them? Are you going to stand there with a blank face? Duh. You and I are under the mandate of 1 Pet 3:15 to be able to give an answer to the person. So I'm sorry, I didn't write 1 Pet 3:15, God did and

therefore it's a mandate to you, to me, and to all Christians to get our stuff together so we can at least give a halfway intelligent answer to people. That's why Acts 17 is important.

The second thing I want to add is that I'm here to help you. I'm not here to witness to your buddies, that's your job, but I will help train you in the Scriptures. How it works is sort of like reconnaissance. Recon guys go out and gather information about the enemy and then they come back and report to the Commander who mulls it over and then gives you the plan. I'm here for you; we're here on earth to witness to the lost. And this happens on occasion. Some of you come to me, you know who you are, and you've got your friend and your trying to witness to them and you come tell me what's going on, what kind of stuff they're saying and then I'll probably ask you some questions to sharpen you, then I'll say, alright, try this, then you go try it and they pull something else and so we come back to the drawing board, analyze what happened and try again. Witnessing is not easy and we often fall for their agenda. So don't expect a one shot deal, it can take months and years to get someone to even hear with understanding the whole message of the gospel. So, I'm here to train you so you can go out on the battlefield and win people for Christ.

A third thing that's very interesting is about Paul himself. Paul was sort of an anomaly as you've probably gathered. On one hand he was a Jew so he knew Jewish thought, on the other hand he was Jew of the *diaspora* and he grew up in Tarsus of Cilicia which was a Greek intellectual center. What are we saying? We're saying when you know the other side it gives you an advantage. This is why the evolutionists rarely debate creationists anymore. In the 80's you had a lot of debates. Till the evolutionists figured out, hey, these guys know our position as well as we do, if not better. And at that point they quit. Just don't even give them the time of day, that's the best argument evolution can make today, just scoff at it and call it religion. But you don't see evolutionists challenging creationists to debate. It's an embarrassment and nobody likes to be embarrassed. So if you really want to have an advantage witnessing learn what the other guy thinks. We should say it's not absolutely required, you can get by but you'll be limited.

Now, to get to know the other side, here's what I suggest. Ask questions. Don't plow into them. Back off, ask questions. This is where I always mess

up. One person asks me a question and I charge into the answer and before you know it I'm 30 minutes in and all I've done is confuse the person. And I can tell that because I finally ask them a question and they come out with something and I think, why didn't you cut me off 29 ½ minutes ago. I keep making the same mistakes. You will too. Don't worry, figure out what you did wrong, pray about it and keep going. So just stop and ask them some questions. Here's some for your repertoire that will give you a good idea of what they believe. Where do you think the universe came from? What is God like? Oh, God doesn't exist? Do you know everything? How do you know God doesn't exist? If God does exist is He subject to natural law? How do you know that your brain works right? Is there such a thing as good and evil? What's the standard for making choices? When we have a thought in our head is that a biochemical reaction or is there something as real choice? Those are just some starters. That will give you a good idea where a person is coming from and just follow those out, keep asking questions.

Fifth, if you think you have to walk up to a person and start in on the gospel message that's not true. That's a very uncomfortable thing for most people to do. I'm not saying don't do it, I'm just saying that the way the Bible thinks is that you can start anywhere with a person, any topic because every topic is God's topic, every fact is a Christian fact and therefore, of course, the better adapted you are to the way the Bible thinks the better you can do this. Here's an example: the other day we were watching a documentary on surfing, it was about top surfers who travel the world looking for the largest wave. And they have a weather system and buoys all over the world that relay information back into their computer program and when they see a storm system over in Spain or China they pack up their gear and head out. Now, these guys are pretty rank unbelievers but they say some interesting things that tell you about them. You just have to listen. Always searching for the biggest wave. Why? Who cares? And you can listen to them, man, that was a gnarly wave, it was so awesome and you think, why? You know why? Because they're doing what man was designed to do? They're having dominion over nature. It's an obsession of man. We have to go out and conquer the highest mountain, we have to fly through the sky, and we have to make a smaller microchip. Why do we keep doing that? Because God made us to do that. We're made in His image. God programmed us to have dominion. They don't know why they're doing it but they're doing it. And I find it fascinating personally. I can talk about them as human beings and about dominion over

nature. I can also talk to them about nature. I can talk to them about the tube that forms in the wave that surfers love to ride, why does it form that way? Because God made the water with a certain molecular structure and the wind at that time and place at that speed and the surface of the ocean floor, how that shapes the wave. Who set that all up back at the global Flood of Noah? Of course there are other factors, the position and size of the reef, the location of the continents, the position of the moon and all the other factors. All that was done by God, and they're out there enjoying all of this stuff God gave them, they want to go out and conquer it. It feels good they say, yeah it feels good; it was what you were made for. It's all right there in the surf. That's the way Paul thought about the world, that's the Jewish way of thinking. That is not the Greek way of thinking. We see an eagle and we just go, yeah, that's neat. But Jews thought, it's more than neat, the eagle's wings outstretched over its young is teaching us about how God protects His people. So the world is rich with revelation about God, we just have to train ourselves to ask the questions, to really dig in; to stop going through life at 70mph and just stop and listen, look, touch, it's all coming into contact with God. It's all in the word of God, then we can use that to get into worshipping God in new and exciting ways, we can use that to get in conversations with people. This is a fantastic thing about being a Christian. The creation is rich with ways to explore and worship God. And any one of them is a jumping off point to get to the gospel.

Another thing, why are we following so close Acts 17, has to do with presuppositions or ultimate commitments. I've said Athens is the model for our day. Why not Acts 13 at Pisidian Antioch? We have an extended address there. Because Acts 13 was to Jews in synagogue, they had a biblical base. Now, maybe if you lived in America in 1875 when there was still a biblical base Acts 13 could be the model but we're not living in 1875, we're living in 2009 and the Bible is not the base. So look, here's Paul's culture. Paul was a Jew and the Jews held the OT bible in high regard; that was their source of authority. So when Paul witnessed to Jews he was witnessing to people who said, "Yes, the word of God is the authority." But when Paul faced Greeks did they say the word of God is the authority? No, they said the word of Plato is the authority, the word of Epicurus, the word of Zeno. These guys are the authorities. So they're coming from two different bases. And it doesn't get any more opposite than that. That's why I've called all these lessons Jerusalem Meets Athens; maybe I should have called it Jerusalem vs Athens because

the two are in total collision. But I think you see the point. We're over here on a biblical base and our culture is working off a non-biblical base

If you don't figure out the base in your culture you're going to be frustrated. That means you have to stay up with the flow of thought. We can't disengage from the culture and isolate ourselves. We have to stay informed about how people think. If you don't do that then you'll be ignorant about where people are and even why your grown children think the way they think. And you won't know what to say to them. Martin Luther said, "Where the battle rages there the loyalty of the soldier is proved; and to be steady on all the battle front besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point." What good does it do to win a little side conflict if you're getting slaughtered on the main issues? If they're enveloping you with the total culture then you're not even in the battle and they neutralize the gospel over and over and over.

How did Paul figure out how people thought in Athens? The first thing he did was take a walk. He observed idols, idols all over the city and he said, man alive, this place needs the word of God and so he went out and I'm sure he learned a lot in that marketplace about how those people thought. And at first they were whooping Paul real good in vv 17-18. They were enveloping the gospel and spitting it out, didn't even break through the outer shell of these people. And I look at most of us in our own day and I have to say this continues to happen. This is as modern as it gets and I think many Christians get disheartened because they really want their friends to accept Jesus but every time they present Jesus their friend just chews Jesus up and re-interprets Him. Jesus means all sorts of things to people today.

Mormonism has a place for Jesus, Islam has a place for Jesus. Even most atheists have a place for Jesus, at least as a historical person. What we're saying happens here is when you preach Jesus they slurp Jesus up and re-interpret Him in their worldview. And you think, okay, so and so is a believer. Really? Who does so and so think Jesus was? Did you ask more questions? Because if you didn't then they may believe that Jesus died on a cross in the first century Jerusalem. Yeah, he died, so what, lots of people were crucified by the Romans. Are they really saved? Hardly. And you get in these discussions and you wonder two hours later, what are we doing here, how did I get myself into this mess? And it is a mess. What you're experiencing isn't something new, it may be new for you if you haven't witnessed much but it's not new in history because that's what was

happening to Paul at Athens in Acts 17, that's what happened to Paul at Lystra in Acts 14.

I'm convinced from studying the Book of Acts that Paul's on a learning curve and that by the time he writes the Book of Romans he's got it knocked out cold. That curve goes from Acts 14 to Acts 17 and finally to the Book of Romans. Romans is nothing more than a systematized version of how Paul preached the gospel. And what's the theme of Romans? The Righteousness of God. See, it gets back to who and what God is. The gospel makes no sense apart from the righteousness of God. What's the standard? After I find that out then I can say, alright, I missed it, I need help. Then we can talk about the help, the savior. All important stuff. God, sin and salvation. Well, Paul's pretty much figured it out by Acts 17 but it took him about two years to figure out how to witness to Gentile pagans. And when I say pagan I'm not using that in a derogatory sense. I don't mean someone who is immoral or crude. A pagan in the original sense of the term is simply someone who does not adhere to the culture of the Bible. There may be and have been very moral pagans. Rom 2 is concerned with the moral ones. Rom 1 with the immoral one's. So someone may be more or less pagan, by which we just mean to say, more or less consistent with pagan presuppositions. The men in Athens were very consistent; we'd say they were close to pure paganism. And Paul studied to figure out how to witness to people who were pure pagans, who didn't rest on the Bible.

And this brings us to the point of contention. How do we witness in our culture? What kind of a culture do we have? If Paul went out and learned the Athenian culture a bit, shouldn't we? We could go into a whole lot. Our culture stems back to the Protestant Reformation of the 1500's which was built on the word of God. Countries like Switzerland, Germany and England. America is really an extension of England and so we inherited a biblical base, particularly during the Colonial period when our forefathers enjoyed great freedom on American soil. But by the time you get to Jefferson the biblical base was eroding and the Enlightenment was influencing. Jefferson was a Deist which came out of the Enlightenment and so we have in the Declaration of Independence a more humanistic document. It's promoting Jeffersonian democracy. The framers of the US Constitution, eleven years later, wrote against the Declaration. They were promoting a Republic. Just read the two documents side by side, they don't harmonize. The Declaration

is about the perfectability of man and the Constitution is about the depravity of man, checks and balances. The basic issue in politics, even today, is the nature of man. Is man essentially good or essentially evil? Every political difference can be traced back to that one issue. So I argue that by the time we get to 1789 and those two documents are written, the biblical base was already corrupted. Of course, Deism slid into Unitarianism and Unitarianism into Transcendentalism and then we move into the period of Darwinism and Social Darwinism and the Pragmatism of Roosevelt on up to our own day. But the point is we have been sliding further and further from the biblical base of the Colonials, who were basically Puritan Calvinists. Don't be angry at Calvinists, they were the people that actually believed in the sovereignty of God and the depravity of man. And the more you recognize that the more freedoms you will have. The less you recognize it and preach the sovereignty of man, which the Transcendentalists did, and the goodness of man, the less freedom you enjoy. But still into the early 1900's there was enough of a biblical base that when you went in to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ you could do more like Paul did with the Jews. Basically the consensus of the population was biblical categories and this was the era of the tract; three points and you're saved. Now we're still trying to witness to our generation with three points and we're getting clobbered, just like Paul did at Lystra and Athens. What am I trying to say? Our culture has become more like Athens than any previous generation in American history! Paganism in American has replaced the Bible as the base. We have well-known atheists Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens with books on the New York Times bestseller list. Hundreds of thousands and even millions of Americans have read their books. And a radical atheism is rising in America. Who was Paul witnessing to at Athens? Epicureans. Who were they? They were the atheists of the day. And so we have to structure our defense of the faith more and more the way Paul structured his. The era of tracts is over, the era of Paul has returned. That's why we're so interested in what Paul did in Acts 17. At least I am. I'm interested in reaching the people of today with the gospel, not the people of yesterday.

And so in Acts 17:22-23 we've seen how Paul began where we have to begin in dealing with paganism and that is attack the basis of pagan thought, push them away so they can really see the difference. You know that God exists because God made you know He exists but you refuse to acknowledge who He is. You're suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. So Paul is on firm

ground when he says that the non-Christian, particularly those in Athens worship ignorantly. Paul calls them “ignorant” twice in verse 23 and isn’t it interesting that he’s using it in the place where the most educated people lived, Athens. He never called any other group ignorant, but he says you are ignorant. That had to come as a shock. But when you’re dealing with know-it-alls you have to shock them out of their arrogance. Paul says, you guys are ignorant.

And then after this, this being the introduction to the gospel, Paul proceeds to the next point in a good gospel presentation which is to declare the nature of God. That has to be clear, you can’t talk about saving from sin, Christ died on the cross, Christ is God and man and all that. That’s useless talk unless your hearer has in his mind a concept of God equal to that of the Scriptures. If he does, fine, move on, if he doesn’t you can sit and talk from now until hell freezes over and nothing is going to happen because the person just simply envelops the message. This is why Dr. Schaeffer said, look, we’ve got statistics of people who believe in Jesus as Savior who are not sure whether or not God exists. Now something’s wrong. I mean, how do you accept Christ as Savior if you’re not yet sure that the God of the Scriptures exist? Well obviously the only way that could come about is by accepting a Christ other than the one in the Bible. So we have people believing in Christ as Savior but it’s a different Christ. So we have to be careful about that; you must make sure people understand the character of God first. We’re not saying they have to know every detail about God, but they do have to have a biblical concept of God. The way Paul did this was by introducing God as the Creator in verse 24, **the God who made the world and all things in it**. Now that establishes very quickly the Creator-creature distinction, the most elementary truth in the word of God. But what people don’t like to do is draw the implications out of that picture. If God is the Creator and you are the creature then isn’t the creature totally dependent upon the Creator? Of course he is. And there’s our first attribute of God here. We say God is *a-se*, short for aseity, which means God is independent, there’s nothing outside of Himself that He depends upon. He’s totally self-sufficient. The flipside of that is that man is totally dependent upon God. That’s what he means when he says at the end of v 25, **He gives life and breath and all things**. No man has ever lived independently of God for even one moment; man has been in constant dependence upon God. So now not only is God the Creator of all but He’s the Sustainer of all, He’s holding you up. In vv 26, 27, and 28 he goes

into some of the things He's done so men would seek Him. He's organized men into distinct nations, He's determined the shapes of the continents, He's established limits on weather patterns, He's done all so that man would seek God. Talk about a profound view of history. God has structured the continents to serve a spiritual function? That's what Paul says. See, that's the Jewish way of thinking. Nothing is incidental, everything has purpose. But c'mon, weather patterns? Whether we're facing drought or flood? Yeah, that's there to prompt a response to Him. If you would, God wants man to come looking for him but mankind is in sort a dark room groping around trying to find someone they don't even know they're looking for. It's like Van Til said, the fallen natural man is like a man on a cold dark night who is looking for a black cat that isn't there and you are blind. Not a very fruitful endeavor. He hasn't got the spiritual eyes to see. He's a depraved fallen sinner.

So that's the kind of God that Paul declares. God is the Creator and He's the Sustainer that is A-se, independent. Man is the creature and He's dependent on God and therefore responsible to God. And now we come to the invitation, verse 30. I call you to pay attention to this invitation because the first thing called for here is not faith in the Lord Jesus Christ but repentance toward God. Actually God commands it. That word **declaring** means "to give orders." It's more than yeah, if you want to repent. He's commanding all people to repent. Now, what is repentance? And repent about what? Repentance means a change of mind, a change of thinking. God commands you to change the way you think about Him. He's not like a Greek god or goddess. You made those; they are figments of your imagination. In reality God made you and sustains you. So that's what the repentance is all about here. It's not repentance about the Lord Jesus Christ. We're not to faith in Jesus Christ yet. The issue here is God not Jesus. Turn to Acts 20:21. Paul got close to the elders he ministered to and when he was saying bye bye to the Ephesian elders he declares to them, in v 21, his standard operating procedure, "solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice two things, not one thing with two aspects but two things. Repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Now I'm convinced this is the sequence Paul preached. He'd come into your community and the first thing he'd do was say, these people are all screwed up on who God is. So I preach the nature of God and if they're buying into that and they want to hear more then I go on to Jesus, which some at Athens wanted, some did not. So there's a break in Paul's

preaching. He preaches to all repentance about the nature of God and then for those who said, alright, I'm buying it, then he preached Jesus. If he didn't do that he found that they got the wrong Jesus. So, let's go back and see what happens at Athens.

Verse 31, what does he say, he's still talking about this God. He doesn't mention Jesus yet, he just says God **has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man, whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.** Interesting he doesn't say the man's name. He just says **a Man.** You know why? He's not ready to introduce Him yet. Right here Acts 20:21 should be coming to mind. Repentance toward God first. Here's what he's interested in right here. Have you bought into the view of God I've presented or not. If you have then you should have no problem buying into this God fixing a day of judgment, appointing the Judge and raising people from the dead. Judgment and Resurrection naturally follow if a sovereign Creator God is there. So are you buying it Athenians? Are you buying into this God? Have you repented about the nature of God?

Verse 32 gives the answer. **Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer,** That's an imperfect - they went on and on and on, ha, ha Paul, ridiculous and when you get that kind of a response you're done with those people, there's no use going on, they haven't repented about the nature of God, they're still hardened in their unbelief. V 33, **So Paul went out of their midst.** But there's another response, **others said, 'We shall hear you [also] concerning this,** not again, **also,** in other words, Paul, we want to hear more about the resurrection. We heard the part about God, now what else have you got to say? What intel had Paul just gathered from this response? They've changed their mind about God. Now we're talking, I've got some people who want to hear more and so I'm going to give them the other half of Acts 20:21. And what happens in v 34, they join up with Paul and he gives them the other half, all the goods - Jesus and the Resurrection. They were ready to hear that. ³⁴**But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.**

Now a few comments on the results of Paul's great address. The woman, **Damaris.** Over and over we've noticed Luke, since chapter 16, and ever since

the invasion of Europe what has been the constant theme? Every place the gospel has gone he relishes in pointing out that women are responding to Jesus Christ. Why does Luke keep doing this to us? Why time and again, city after city, Greek or Jew, the **women**, and usually the upper class women, are the ones pictured as coming to Christ. The answer is because it was such a revolutionary thing, that Christianity had a fantastic impact on Europe immediately on the **women** of Europe. They saw they were not second rate beings in the eyes of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ had died for them to and this attracted them. They were coming to Christ by the droves.

And then the **Dionysius**, this man in verse 34, who is he? I must warn you that in our evangelical fundamental circles there's a tradition that goes on and you will hear Bible teacher after Bible teacher tell you about this tradition. And it goes like this: you see, Paul tried the philosophic approach in Acts 17 and he failed, he got depressed, he realized it was just a waste of time to try to argue on a philosophical plane and therefore he came down the highway from Athens to the next city on the highway which was Corinth. And at Corinth, according to the epistle to the Corinthians he said "I determine to know nothing among you except Christ and Him crucified." So they say, see, Paul threw out all the discussion and just went back to the quote "simple gospel." That's the way they interpret 1 Cor 2:2. That's not the point. When Paul's talking in 1 Cor 2:2 about the simple gospel he means the gospel built only inside the framework of divine viewpoint wisdom, not human viewpoint wisdom. He is not changing his method one bit; proof—because he reuses the same method of Acts 17 in Rom 1 and Rom 1 was written after Acts 17, so therefore, conclusion: Paul did not change his message. That tradition is wrong. Moreover, it's wrong in another place. Did Paul really fail in Athens? Are we really saying that Paul failed when at least four people according to this verse were saved? I find it hard to believe that any person would consider it a failure when people genuinely believed in Christ. One of the interesting men he points out believed in Christ was **Dionysius**. Who was **Dionysius**? It says in the text he was **the Areopagite**. What does that mean? It means he was one of the twelve judges on the council. This was a top man. Paul's message led one of the twelve judges to Christ. That's a big accomplishment; these men had their doctorates under the local philosophical schools. These were the equivalents of the modern day Harvard professor. That's the intellectual caliber of convert that Paul reached on that day. A failure? Hardly. **Dionysius** according to Eusebius, one of the

early church historians, says he became the bishop of the church at Athens and he was such a testimony for Christ, equipped as he was intellectually for the battle and then later on being equipped scripturally, that he, like Paul, was able to penetrate that dark corner of the earth with the gospel. It got to the point that they couldn't stand it any longer and they killed him.

Dionysius went down in history as one of the first Christian martyrs in Greece. There was the result of Acts 17; it was not without results, it had rich results.

Let me summarize by saying this. Don't assume when you work with people and they say I believe in Jesus or I love Jesus that they're believers. A Muslim can say that. Little do you know they only believe Jesus was a prophet and that's far from Jesus as God-incarnate who died on the cross for your sins and was resurrected in a true physical body. All I'm suggesting is that you first figure out what they think about God. Is He the Creator of the universe or is He a part of the universe? Is God a person or a force? Lots of people have believed that God is the physical universe. After you have determined that they have a biblical view of God then go on and present Jesus and the resurrection in that context. That's how I think you have to approach any person to avoid false professions, false confidences. In the end we're interested in people hearing the gospel with understanding. We can't make people believe but we do have the command to always be ready to give them an answer. We do have the command to preach the word. And we do know the truth that to believe unto salvation the gospel must be understood.

[Back To The Top](#)

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